"I am not a journalist":

Identity negotiation among subcultural media 'journalists' in Singapore

Sim Jui Liang

Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information,

Nanyang Technological University

******

Abstract

Identity represents an integral aspect of a social group's culture and a qualitative study of subcultural media 'journalists' in Singapore has found that most of them did not identify themselves as journalists. Instead they preferred to describe themselves as writers, activists, educators or members of the subcultures to which their media projects cater. This discovery is significant as their editorial values and practices actually resemble those of mainstream media, with many having undergone socialisation in journalism school or commercial newsrooms. So why do these subcultural writers and editors distance themselves from the journalistic profession? At first sight, it appears that their identity negotiation stems from their personal and social motivations for joining subcultural media, which range from a passion for writing and subcultural topics such as vegetarianism and paranormal investigation to promoting environmental activism and engendering societal change. On another level, their unwillingness to call themselves journalists could be related to their peripheral location outside mainstream media structures. Unlike journalists employed by commercial media organisations, subcultural media 'journalists' sustain their unprofitable media projects with freelance writing assignments or full-time employment unrelated to journalism. Hence, the production and dissemination of subcultural media takes place within diverse social settings including non-governmental organisations, educational institutions and cafés. This enables them to select from multiple fluid identities as informed by not only their media projects but also their professional work and subcultures. Hence, subcultural media's marginal, deinstitutionalised and decapitalised nature contributes to a rejection of the 'journalist' label.

In his book on political movements, Jeff Pratt (2003) singles out identity as a "notoriously slippery concept" (p. 10) and "one of the most problematic in anthropology" (p. 96). Indeed, the definition of identity seemingly belies the complexity that characterises this term. Anthropologist Anthony Cohen (1993) defines identity as "the way(s) in which a person is, or wishes to be, known by certain others" (1993, p. 195), before adding that the "charged nature of cultural identity is that in claiming one, you do not merely associate yourself with a set of characteristics: you also distance yourself from others" (1993, p. 197).

Similarly, according to Martin Sökefeld, central to identity is "a consciousness of sharing certain characteristics (a language, a culture, etc.) within a group" (Sökefeld, 1999, p. 417). He notes that the discussion of identity revolves around the notion of difference, which in turn acknowledges the plurality of identities, some of which contrasting and even conflicting. That an individual possesses not a singular identity but potentially multiple and contradicting ones is in line with the notion of identity as fragmented and constantly shifting (Hall, 1990).

Identity then is not an inherent quality of an individual but a social construct, "a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices (Sarup, 1996, p.11). Identities, Sarup suggests, are constructed – in and through language – by social structures which erect material and political impediments on the way individuals act, think and define themselves. Nevertheless, social institutions and structures are not omnipotent in imposing identities on us; human agency or in Sarup's words, "free will", affords individuals some leeway in interpreting and selecting our identities.

In a similar vein, Pratt (2003) treats identity "as a complex narrative, politically constructed, defining boundaries and oppositions" (p. 39). To him, identity narratives are structured along two axes; the first axis is biographical and horizontal, running through the past, present and future while the second vertical axis defines who we are through the construction of an "other" (p. 10). Hence identity is multifaceted and contextual. The significance of context in shaping identity formation and selection is also acknowledged by other scholars – identity is a "product of historically specific practices of social regulation" (Hendriques et al, 1984, p. 12).

While the debate on identity continues among anthropologists and other social scientists, their discussion has reminded us to rethink identity selection as an unproblematic process but to consider the possible negotiation and contestation involved. Identities are often in a state of fluidity, shaped by particular contexts. The importance of context becomes more significant when we turn our attention to the relationship between identity and journalism, especially where the media, social, cultural and political environments in which journalists inhabit exert an influence on their identity formation and selection.

Identity and journalism

Given that identity selection entails the association of oneself with a set of characteristics, professional journalists perceive themselves as providing a public service such as that of a watchdog of society (Deuze, 2005). According to Deuze, professional journalists, at least those in western societies, also pride themselves as being objective and neutral in their reporting, as well as being insistent on editorial autonomy and freedom, in addition to having a sense of immediacy and ethics.

Other scholars have focused on the identity negotiation of journalists, especially when the social category of gender comes into play. Female sports journalists, for instance, struggle to reconcile their dual identities of being a woman and being a sports journalist due to a newsroom culture that emphasises their gender inferiority in relation to sports and journalism (Hardin and Shain, 2007). Likewise, Thiel (2007) notes that technology imbues in female online journalists employed by traditional media organisations a perceived but false sense of increased opportunity to shift between the professional identity of journalist and the gendered identities of mother or wife.

Linked to shifting identities is the notion of identity construction and selection, and according to Bogaerts (2011), the concepts of "performance" and "ritual" are beneficial in understanding how journalistic practices contribute to "the construction, maintenance and contestation of journalistic values as part of the occupational identity of the journalist" (Bogaerts, 2011, p. 400). It is through the daily performance in ways that are aligned with the values and norms of journalism such as objectivity that one constructs the journalistic identity.

With technological developments such as the Internet and blogging transforming passive media consumers into active media producers, as well as challenging the power of mainstream media, researchers have begun to examine the identities of journalists working in alternative media[1]. For example, Forde (2011) observes that unlike a decade ago, alternative journalists in Australia are more likely to call themselves journalists, even if they lacked formal journalism degrees, due to the proliferation of citizen journalism and blogging. However, some prefer hybrid identities such as journalist-activist or journalist-educator.

In a study of editors helming Ethiopian diaspora news websites, Skjerdal (2011) found a strong sense of self-identity as journalists rather than activists among his interviewees. They subscribe to an international set of professional journalism ethics, ideologies and standards, in addition to regarding their websites as a form of public service rather than an advocacy outlet for certain political goals. Nevertheless, their self-identity contradicts their journalistic practices in reality where their news stories provide an

---

[1] Atton and Hamilton (2008) consider alternative journalism as produced by amateurs outside mainstream media. Alternative journalism is also critical of dominant journalistic practices and it changes in response to the dominant, usually mainstream, forms of journalism. At times, the definition incorporates a counter-hegemony component that challenges the dominant capitalist forms of media production, distribution and reception. Under the broad term of alternative media, there exist specialised forms such as community media, radical media and subcultural media.

alternative viewpoint to the Ethiopian people by raising awareness of the totalitarian regime in their country. While activism is at odds with the espoused value of news objectivity, these interviewees justify their actions as necessary, given the dire political situation in Ethiopia.

In Singapore, there has not been any research that focuses on journalistic identity. Nevertheless, a comprehensive study (Hao and George, 2012) has been conducted in recent years involving journalists employed by the country's two major mainstream media organisations – Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp Pte Ltd. The survey examines professional journalists' social demographics, values and attitudes, motivations for entering journalism, job satisfaction level and perceived media roles. While the study did not specifically address journalistic identity, some of its findings could be of relevance. For instance, the majority of respondents entered journalism because of personal interests and passion for writing, and consider journalism a dream job. Over half the respondents also demonstrated commitment to journalism, indicating that they want to remain in the same job.

Despite the wealth of research on journalistic identity, one should ask if any particular groups of journalists have been left out of the discussion. While researchers are increasing turning their attention to writers and editors working outside "professional" mainstream media structures, the alternative media is more diverse than usually imagined. Compared to radical politicised media, citizen participatory media and community media, subcultural media is one aspect that is often overlooked.

Media for and by subcultures

Subcultural media are "produced by existing members of subcultures with the intent of serving the needs of that subculture" (Synder, 2006, p. 96). Using the gay and lesbian subcultures in the US as an example, their subcultural media would consist of online forums, bulletin boards, weekly listings of television programmes with gay and lesbian-related content, and the Oasis website providing information and contacts for gay and lesbian teenagers (Gross, 1998).

The relationship between subcultural media and subcultures is well-explored in Paul Hodkinson's (2002) study of goths in the UK. Considered as more specific than alternative media, subcultural media constitute an internal part of a subcultural infrastructure and "operate mostly within the networks of a particular grouping" (Hodkinson, 2002, p. 33). Participation in subcultural media is often voluntary with diverse contributors. Hodkinson notes that subcultural media products are distributed internally among its members and are seldom visible outside subcultural networks, hence their low circulation. Moreover, subcultural media facilitate the construction of a subculture in several aspects: Firstly, subcultural media filter and disseminate relevant, specialist information to members, thereby sustaining their interest and participation in their subculture. Such information also connects the members to other parts of the subcultural infrastructure such as businesses. Secondly, through its gatekeeping role of filtering information, subcultural media define and reinforce

the value system and boundaries of a subculture. Thirdly, reading news and stories about their own subculture fosters in members an imagined sense of belonging and shared identity.

Subcultural media is also examined in Sarah Thornton's (1996) ethnographic study of club cultures, although she uses the terms micro-media and niche media. To her, "communications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them" (Thornston, 1996, p. 162). While mainstream media's negative coverage of a particular subculture might inadvertently boost its credibility, micro-media such as flyers, listings and fanzines contribute to the social organisation of clubbers as a subculture by managing the information flow and guiding clubbers to specific venues. Niche media like music and style consumer magazines, on the other hand, document, authenticate and construct subcultures simultaneously, as they "give definition to vague cultural formations, pull together and reify the disparate materials which become subcultural homologies" (Thornton, 1996, p. 151).

The functions of subcultural media are also briefly discussed by other scholars. To Synder (2006), the creation of a subcultural form would precede the creation of its subcultural media. Hence, studying subcultural media could "reveal the political and social implications of a specific subculture" (Synder, 2006, p. 96). James Curran (2002) locates subcultural media within the civic media sector and links it "to a social constituency rather than an organised group" (Curran, 2002, p. 242). To him, subcultural media facilitate organisational effectiveness by promoting social cohesion and common identity, and clarifying values and goals through discussions within the constituency.

Existing discussion on subcultural media has mainly revolved around its role in contributing to the construction of subcultures and its impact on subcultural media audiences. Hardly discussed is the impact of subcultural media on its own producers. The implication is that the study of subcultural media is theorised as secondary to the study of subcultures and the people producing the subcultural magazines, flyers and listings remain mostly invisible and silent. There is an urgent need to make sense of the experiences and culture of editors and writers involved in subcultural media.

Informants' backgrounds

This paper's discussion on identity negotiation is part of a larger study examining the culture[2] of subcultural media "journalists" in Singapore, including their motivations, beliefs, values, practices, self-definitions and their relationships with readers and mainstream media. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in English between March and October 2013 with 11 individuals who are involved in the writing or editing of subcultural media projects in Singapore. Given that diversity exists between and within subcultures, a conscious effort was

---

[2] Given that our understanding of subcultural media and its culture remains at a nascent stage, a broad definition of culture as a way of life was adopted. One such broad definition was suggested by Hall and Jefferson (1975) who define culture as the "meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life" (Hall and Jefferson, 1975, p. 10).

made at the onset of the research stage to ensure that a wide spectrum of subcultural media projects are included in the study, from print magazines and newspapers to blogs and websites.

The informants[3] in this study are involved in media projects for the subcultures of Buddhists, divers, older persons, heritage enthusiasts, scientists, plant lovers, vegetarians, paranormal investigators, the creative class, feminists and students of a local university. These are by no means fly-by-night media projects, with most informants' length of involvement ranging from two to seven years. For these projects, English is the medium of communication. The informants are members of the subcultures that their media projects cater to, except for the informant who publishes an online magazine for older persons – her age does not qualify her as a senior citizen. Nine of the informants are Singapore citizens and in terms of gender and ethnicity, there are six females and five males. All the informants are ethnic Chinese except for two ethnic Indians.

Most informants are in their 20s and 30s, with the youngest and the oldest aged 23 and 45 respectively. Marital status-wise, seven informants are single, thereby supporting Atton and Hamilton's (2008) observation that individuals involved in alternative media tend to be free from family and financial commitments. Of the four married informants, three are in full-time employment that is unrelated to media, and they use their salaries to fund their subcultural media projects. The other informant is a full-time employee of a monastery that publishes a Buddhist magazine. Therefore, a stable income enables these married informants to fulfil their family commitments without sacrificing their media projects.

Rejection of the 'journalist' label

As cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder (1997) reminds researchers to be sensitive to the surprise of fieldwork, it is fascinating to note that most informants do not identify themselves as journalists or editors. Only two informants defined themselves as journalists, albeit with qualifications.[4]

Tara, who is the editor of a Buddhist magazine, saw herself as a journalist and editor but it would include her religious identity. Nevertheless, should she return to work in mainstream media, she would "want to be known for my role as a journalist or an editor". Despite having taken modules on news writing and editing her campus newspaper, undergraduate Goldilocks preferred the term "student journalist". She felt that she still lacked "maturity in the reporting" and her self-identity is formed in reference to the local mainstream media: her appraisal of her campus newspaper's unsatisfactory journalistic standards was based on comparisons with *The Straits Times*, Singapore's national newspaper, which uses a "nuanced" language.

---

[3] With the exception of Debby and Charles who prefer to use their actual names, pseudonyms are used for the other informants.

[4] Since most informants do not identify themselves as journalists, it is more appropriate to use the term subcultural "journalists" in inverted commas, including in the paper's title.

That most informants do not identify themselves as journalists is significant in two aspects. First, it contradicts the fact that their editorial values and practices actually mirror those of mainstream journalists. For instance, their story selection decisions are often driven by the mainstream journalistic values of localism and scoop. Like the mainstream media practice of privileging authoritative and elite sources, subcultural media "journalists" tend to feature the successful members of their subcultures in their stories. More importantly, the subcultural editorial process is similar to the top-down practices of mainstream media – the informants make key decisions such as conceptualising story ideas, commissioning writers, as well as editing or even rejecting contributors' articles.

Moreover, prior to becoming involved in subcultural media, most informants have experienced rigorous socialisation in educational institutions and commercial newsrooms. Over half of them studied journalism or mass communication and have written for consumer magazines or newspapers on a full-time or freelance basis.

Second, the informants' responses differ from their counterparts in other societies like Australia (Forde, 2011) and Ethiopia (Skjerdal, 2011). Hence, Forde's (2011) explanation of the prevalence of citizen journalism and blogging increasing the confidence of alternative journalists in Australia to identify themselves as journalists, despite their lack of formal journalism degrees, appears to be irrelevant to the informants in this study.

For the majority of informants, they prefer labels such as activist, educator and writer. A few align themselves with their own subcultures, calling themselves a scientist or paranormal investigator. At first sight, the informants' decision to distance themselves from journalism appears to be linked to their personal and social motivations for becoming involved in subcultural media. The two informants who described themselves as writers mentioned their passion for writing as one of the reasons for getting involved in media-related work.

Informants whose media projects are geared towards the realisation of socially conscious goals are likely to identify themselves as educators and advocates. Debby blogs about marine life in Singapore and called herself an activist before adding laughingly that it was "not a very receptive word here". Nevertheless, she is most motivated to pursue stories that inspire others to make a change in their community, including environmental conservation. Similarly, Laura, who launched an online magazine for older persons to break ageist stereotypes, considers herself an educator and is keen to increase her role as an advocate for the silver-haired generation.

Other reasons were also proffered by the informants. The lack of formal socialisation in journalism could also prevent someone from identifying oneself as a journalist. Despite possessing a PhD and being the editor-in-chief of an online magazine focusing on scientific developments in Asia, Jennifer is hesitant to associate herself with the journalistic profession: "No because I don't have the right credentials… I need to be more professional on my own. That means I need some training. So I can't call myself a journalist. I always call myself a scientist. I think that's more appropriate, like more realistic." However, for Lester, the fact

that he majored in journalism in university and travels around Singapore to document historical sites and vanishing trades like any other reporter has little effect on his decision to not identify himself as a journalist or even a blogger. His rationale: "Because it's just ultimately a blog and it's not about the person behind this blog, it's the places."

Subcultural media as deinstitutionalised and decapitalised

Jayzee who blogs about architecture and design, offered another explanation: "Like when I say I am journalist right, there's always a natural assumption that you are with a media… for a mainstream media writer, I think you are actually contracted to an organisation and you can only write for that organisation lah." Hence, to this informant, journalists are affiliated with or are employed by a particular media organisation.

On a related note, two informants let on that they do not consider their work as solely media-related when asked if they would identify themselves as journalists. Debby does not regard her blog as a "media thing… it's a volunteer organisation and its job is to educate". After all, other than blogging about marine-related issues, Debby conducts paid guided diving tours to raise awareness of environmental issues.

Echoing Debby's sentiments is Natasha who handles the communications for a feminist organisation in Singapore, including editing its newsletter and blog: "I am not a journalist… It is very different from being a journalist because now I am working for a specific organisation, putting across a certain perspective, and putting across awareness, like trying to raise awareness on a certain issue. So it's not the same as being a journalist at all." Having worked as a journalist prior to joining the feminist organisation, she explained: "Yah, previously job was journalism, we were writing about current affairs, across the field. We weren't focusing on one specific issue; and we were not trying to advocate anything." She added that while communications constitute a significant aspect of advocating for gender equality, it is not so much journalism. Besides, her job scope is related to corporate communications than journalism. More importantly, she did not consider her organisation a media: "I think we, we work with media, and we influence media and we contribute to media. But we are not media. We are an advocacy and research organisation. We are not a media organisation, yah." Thus, to Debby and Natasha, their subcultural media work is simply a means to a more pivotal end of social change advocacy.

The reactions of these informants suggest that the deinstitutionalised nature of subcultural media might provide explanatory power to their distancing from the journalistic identity. This deinstitutionalised characteristic refers to the fact that the production and dissemination of subcultural media content hardly take place within the context of a media organisation. Unlike the traditional mainstream newspapers, magazines and even websites that operate from the newsrooms of commercial media organisations, most informants write and edit their stories in the private confines of their homes or public spaces such as cafés and libraries. For informants who are employed full-time to write for a specific subculture, their editorial work nonetheless takes place within non-media settings such as non-governmental

organisations and places of religious worship. This observation on the deinstitutionalised nature of subcultural media is supported by the fact that the interviews for this study took place in diverse non-media settings, including educational institutions, cafés, a backpackers' hostel and even a monastery.

Moreover, the writing and editing of subcultural media content often happens during the wee hours of the morning or weekends as many informants are engaged in full-time employment as educators, scientists and civil servants. Several informants work as freelance writers on a full-time basis, juggling their paid assignments with their subcultural media projects. It is imperative to note that the financial resources afforded by full-time employment – usually unrelated to media and journalism – and freelance writing projects enable the informants to sustain their unprofitable subcultural media projects. According to Hodkinson (2002), subcultural media tend to be known within the networks of a subculture. This in turn translates to low readership numbers and the difficulty of subcultural media projects to attract advertising revenue as a source of funding. Besides being deinstitutionalised, subcultural media projects are largely decapitalised in that they operate less like a commercial media business and more like a hobby since personal interests in subcultural topics – and not commercial profitability – are the key impetus for becoming involved in subcultural media in the first place.

Hence, the informants' different occupations and work-related projects provide them with a multiplicity of identities to select from, depending on the social setting and the people they interact with (Sarup, 1996). For example, Askhel, who publishes an online magazine for vegetarians but works full-time as a lecturer, shared that he does not discuss or "celebrate" vegetarianism in school. Only when he is outside of the school setting and mingling with the vegetarian community, would he talk about his subcultural media project.

For informants who work on freelance writing assignments on top of their subcultural media project, the nature of their writing assignments also causes them to reject the "journalist" label. Jayzee admitted that while he was "very stuck in the non-fiction journalistic kind of genre", he also worked on "non-journalistic kind of activities" like writing coffee table books. Hence the wider category of a writer was more appropriate.

Hence, it appears that the reluctance of subcultural media writers and editors in Singapore to identify themselves as journalists is linked to the deinstitutionalised nature of subcultural media as well as its decapitalised trait. The latter trait is characterised by subcultural media's weak financial sustainability and the need for subcultural media producers to seek alternative sources of income to sustain their projects. Alternative income sources necessitate non-media forms of employment which in turn give rise to a multiplicity of identities.

Discussion: The significance of power

The deinstitutionalised and decapitalised nature of subcultural media is an apt reflection of its marginal location in Singapore's media ecosystem. With subcultural media projects being produced and disseminated in non-media settings, this deinstitutionalised form of media runs the risks of being perceived as unprofessional and inferior when compared to mainstream media. The legitimacy of subcultural media is therefore at stake. Already, some informants have noted that they experience difficulties securing interviews with newsmakers as well as unequal treatment from public relations representatives that control this access to newsmakers.

Similarly, the decapitalised nature of subcultural media means that such projects are bankrolled by the thin wallets of subcultural "journalists". Informants who have to juggle their subcultural media projects with full-time employment or freelance writing assignments have confided that as much as they had wanted to commit more time and resources to their subcultural media projects, they had to be responsible to their paymasters first. Hence, limited resources spell serious implications for the quality and even longevity of subcultural media projects.

Resource scarcity, poor recognition and unequal access are closely tied to the concept of power, or the (relative) lack thereof, in the case of these subcultural writers and editors. Sarup's (1996) call to place questions of identity in the context of power therefore becomes impossible to ignore.

References

Atton, C., & Hamilton, J. F. (2008). *Alternative journalism*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Bogaerts, J. (2011). On the performativity of journalistic identity. *Journalism Practice*, 5(4), 399-413.

Cohen, A. (1993). Culture as identity: An anthropologist's view. *New Literary History*, 24(1), 195-209.

Curran, J. (2002). *Media and power*. London: Routledge.

Deuze, M. (2005). What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464.

Forde, S. (2011) *Challenging the news: The journalism of alternative and community media*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gross, L. (1998). Minorities, majorities and the media. In Liebes, T. & Curran, J. (Eds.) *Media, ritual and identity*. London: Routledge.

Hall, S. (1990). Introduction: Who needs identity? In Hall, S. & Dugay, P. (Eds.). *Questions of culture and identity*. London: Sage.

Hao, X., & George, C. (2012). Singapore journalism: Buying into a winning formula. In Weaver, D. H. & Willnat, L. (Eds.), *The global journalist in the 21st century*. New York: Routledge.

Hardin, M., & Shain, S. (2006). "Feeling much smaller than you know you are": The fragmented professional identity of female sports journalists. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(4), 322-338.

Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Urwin, C., Venn, C., & Walkerdine, V. (1984). *Changing the subject*. London: Methuen.

Hodkinson, P. (2002). *Goth: Identity, style and subculture*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Pratt, J. (2003). *Class, nation and identity: The anthropology of political movements*. London: Pluto Press.

Sarup, M. (1996). *Identity, culture and the postmodern world*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Shweder, R. A. (1997). The surprise of ethnography. *Ethos*, 25(2), 152-163.

Skjerdal, T. S. (2011). Journalist or activist? Self-identity in the Ethiopian diaspora online community. *Journalism*, 12(6), 727-744.

Sökefeld, M. (1999). Debating self, identity, and culture in anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 40(4), 417-448.

Synder, G. J. (2006). Graffiti media and the perpetuation of an illegal subculture. *Crime Media Culture*, 2(1), 93-101.

Thiel, S. (2004). Shifting identities, creating new paradigms: Analysing the narratives of women online journalists. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(1), 21-36.

Thornton, S. (1996). *Club cultures: Music, media and subcultural capital*. Hanover, London: Wesleyan University Press.